

Sunita to Suni

Sunita Williams will be the second woman of Indian origin to go up in space. The first one, of course, was Kalpana Chawla who was aboard the ill-fated Challenger space shuttle.

We're proud of Sunita Williams as we were of Kalpana Chawla because of our ethnic connection. Is this an Indian thing or do all communities do it? Can you imagine a Juan Rodriguez going through the Mumbai telephone directory to see how many Garcias are listed in the book?

Sunita Williams' Indian connection is a little more tenuous. Her parents are Dr. Deepak & Mrs. Bonnie Pandya and she's married to Michael Williams. She goes by her nickname, "Suni".

As the Indian community assimilates steadily into the American melting pot, it will be harder to make that ethnic connection. From one generation to the next, the first and second names will sound more American. Then, we'll have to be proud of the future Suni Williamses for just being Americans.

That's a good thing, isn't it?

Author, Author!

Another person we can be proud of is Pradeep Anand, who has added novelist to his long list of accomplishments. It is not easy to write a novel that draws from personal experiences. The author reveals a lot about himself and puts his craft to the test of the market.

This is not much different from a stand-up comic in front of a tough crowd. Look at what happened to Seinfeld TV series actor Michael Richards! While Michael Richards is no stand-up comedian, Pradeep Anand is a good writer who has received glowing accolades from many reviewers.

We're proud of the distinguished South Asian authors that have come from our local community – Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidwa and Vikram Chandra, to name a few. These authors have had a long string of successes that have won them a worldwide following.

We hope that his first novel was a good experience for Pradeep Anand and hope that it will encourage him to continue to explore new horizons in writing and publishing.

Pramod Kulkarni

Is Flying in India Safe?

By **BRIJ BHARDWAJ**

Is flying in India becoming unsafe? It is a million dollar question to which no ready answer is available. The rapid expansion in aviation leading to shortage of trained hands and diluting of standards for pilots and engineers along with poor infrastructure are a deadly cocktail which can make flying dangerous in any country. Most of these factors are present in India at present.

The airlines have multiplied. More and more foreign airlines are flying into India and all are adding new capacity every year. The present trend suggests that the capacity to be added every year will lead to doubling of air capacity every three years. There are not enough pilots or engineers available to meet the new demand. The result is that airlines are indulging in large-scale poaching, hiring of foreign pilots and lowering of standards to enable pilots to fly even after they have reached the age of superannuation.

The rapid expansion is also putting a strain on our infrastructure. The airports are not in a position to handle such large volumes of traffic and their efficiency is suffering. The newly recruited staff also lacks adequate training and familiarisation with new equipment installed at various airports. On account of crowding, aircrafts in India are forced to spend 30 minutes to 45 minutes in the air circling over an airport before they get clearance to land. This is a common practice at all busy airports in the world, but for our airports this is a new experience.

Stories like planes taking wrong turns to enter prohibited areas or flying too close to each other and thus increasing possibility of collision are coming out

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with a frequency that raises questions about our safety standards. Flying skills have suffered because of lowering of standards relating to age and number of hours of flying required before one is declared qualified to fly. Rules regarding the presence of at least one member of crew being an Indian have also been relaxed. It has to be admitted that regulations regarding age are a hazard, as it has to be accepted that with age, reflexes become slower.

Airlines being forced to hire fresh recruits are also finding that the fast training processes in countries like the US and Australia leave much to be desired. To fly in the US, where adequate radar coverage is available and an airport can be found every few kilometres, is a different cup of tea as compared to India where pilots have to fly long distances and use their map reading skills - which are not even a part of training in other countries.

The result is that flying in India has reached a point where serious doubts have arisen about the safety standards. There has been an attempt to make the regulator independent of government control, but the

aviation ministry is refusing to budge.

At the moment Indian companies are scratching the bottom of the barrel to find adequate number of hands to keep planes in the air. The search takes them to countries where pilots lack fluency in English, which is the standard language of communication between pilots and air controllers. Some incidents reported recently are a result of poor ability to follow instructions.

The search for trained hands is also leading to a large number of pilots and engineers in the Indian Air Force leaving their jobs and joining commercial flying where salaries are rising at a galloping pace because of current shortages. The reason for the current mess is that India for years kept aviation growth under check. Now we have turned the other way round, where unregulated growth is taking place without bothering about the capacity of infrastructure or safety.

Serious accidents have been avoided so far because the old regulators had insisted on installation of anti-collision equipment in planes on mandatory basis. But things can go wrong despite this precaution as the present cocktail of lower standards, inadequate infrastructure and overstressed air controllers is a deadly combination and our luck can give way anytime. Not very long ago flying in China and Russia was considered unsafe. Is India about to join that dubious club? IANS

Brij Bhardwaj has covered aviation for the period of 20 years for Hindustan Times and has been a consultant with aircraft manufacturers.